



Office of the Town Manager  
Frank Cassidy

**Warrenton Town Council**  
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William Semple, Ward 2  
Brett Hamby, Ward 3  
James Hartman, Ward 4 Vice Mayor  
Eric Gagnon, Ward 5  
Paul Mooney, At Large  
David McGuire, At Large

# STAFF REPORT

<b>Council Meeting Date:</b>	February 13 <sup>th</sup> , 2024.
<b>Agenda Title:</b>	Acquisition of Real Property- Warrenton Horse Show Grounds
<b>Requested Action:</b>	Proceed or don't
<b>Department / Agency Lead:</b>	Town Council
<b>Staff Lead:</b>	Stephen Clough, CMC, Town Clerk.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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The 9.57-acre historic Warrenton Horse Show Grounds, located off Shirley Avenue, is home to the country's oldest continuously operating horse show. It has a maximum development potential of 37 divisions, is subject to development pressure, and is located near the greenway trail, schools, existing neighborhoods, and major road arterials. The Town of Warrenton is exploring options to purchase the Horse Show Grounds from the Warrenton Horse Show Association ownership to preserve the unique land and open it to the public year-round while continuing its popular use as an equine recreation facility.

The discussions between the Town and the Warrenton Horse Show Association span over thirty years. In the early 1990s, the Association expressed an interest in leasing the property to the Town while still being able to have the two horse shows annually. The Town and Association would like to bring the collective discussions over the past thirty years to fruition by working with the Warrenton Horse Show Association to enable the Horse Show to continue in its historical location and preserve the land for open space.

## **BACKGROUND**

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In 1900, the Warrenton Horse Show Association purchased its grounds off Shirley Avenue and thus began a tradition that contributed to the Town's unique and valued horse country heritage for over a century. From its Patsy Cline Pavilions to its storied ring, history continues to be made at this property as equestrians, trainers, and breeders gather for the annual Warrenton Horse and Pony Shows. According to comprehensive plans, the "Oldest Pony Show in America" will be maintained for generations to come. The Town Council regards the property as an extraordinary asset and wishes to ensure its long-term preservation while investing in passive and active recreation opportunities for its residents.

The Warrenton Horse Show grounds consist of two parcels of land totaling 9.57 acres. It is inside the Town of Warrenton and zoned residential with a maximum potential of 37 lots. The appraisal puts the development value of the property at close to \$2 million. The site is approximate to Route 15/29 and Rt 211 along Shirley Avenue, one of the main southern entrances to the Town, and locations to the west, of Route 29. The property is within Warrenton's Ward Three. It is within 0.5 miles from the nearest access to the Warrenton Branch Greenway, and 0.75 miles from the nearest public park.

The Horse Show Grounds typically bring 4000+ visitors per year to Warrenton and are an important link in the economy of Warrenton. The Town is committed to continuing the equine uses of the property. In fact, it

would have negative economic impacts, were the Horse Show Grounds to be developed. A recent Weldon Cooper Study of Agriculture in Fauquier County puts the equine industry's impact at \$66 million. The Warrenton Horse Show Grounds has long been a linchpin of this important industry.

The Warrenton Horse Show, throughout the decades, sought a means to relieve itself of property taxes and maintenance of the site. In the early 1990s, the Association expressed an interest in partnering the property with the Town while continuing its tradition of two annual horse shows. Discussions stalled in the late 1990s, though the Town's interest in helping the Association preserve the property's historic legacy and use it as a public space did not waver. The 2002/2013 Comprehensive Plan designated a park open space as it offers locations for potential farmers markets, community events like the Father's Day Car Show, and more. The Town's desire is the property use to become more diversified and used more frequently. It is an integral part of the Town's identity. Without an active Horse Show Grounds, Warrenton will lose a piece of its public character that no number of new private residences can replace.

Since 2020, park usage has increased nationwide by 63% as communities have sought safe places to gather during the pandemic. The Town Council wishes to obligate federal ARPA funds to assist with long-term recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and provide generational benefits to the Warrenton community. In light of the past three years, supporting residents' high quality of life is crucial, and a park could serve as part of the solution.

Consistent with the open space goals of the Town of Warrenton, additional parks and open space are a priority for the Town. The property located on the East Shirley Avenue corridor also fills a gap: there are no public parks or open spaces south of Main Street in the Town. This allows for a large segment of the Town's population access to the park and its existing and future amenities.

The Town of Warrenton will manage the facility as a public park. The facility has over 120 years of volunteer support for the "Oldest Pony Show in America," and the Town will work collaboratively with volunteers to ensure that the equine values of the property are maintained and enhanced.

The Town will ensure that the grounds are open to the public, which is currently not the case. The park will be part of a larger system of the Greenway Trail that connects Lord Fairfax Community College and Old Town, Eva Walker Park, the Aquatics Center, historic neighborhoods in the immediate vicinity, and schools.

On July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023, a Public Hearing was held on this item.

Subsequent meetings between the Horse Show Grounds and the Town have been productive as to efforts to take in the future to preserve the grounds and the continuation of the shows. At the beginning of the year, 2024, the Horse Show Grounds Association and the Town reached a consensus on future collaboration to continue the shows while the Horse Show Grounds Association retains ownership of the property.

## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

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Consider a Resolution revoking the authorization and direct remaining funds for use in the WWTP/St Leonard's Farm Deed settlement, continuing infrastructure improvements.

## Service Level/Collaborative Impact

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N/A

## Policy Direction/Warrenton Plan 2040

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### ***Historic Resources Goals-***

- HR-1: Conserve, reuse, and promote historic resources to enhance the Town's sense of place and grow the economy.
- HR-2: Preserve the authenticity and tell the stories of historic resources for generations to come through documentation.
- HR-4: Enhance the environment through preservation and sustainability best practices.
- HR-5: Protect the rich histories of existing neighborhoods.
- HR-6: Promote asset-based economic development through historic resources.

### ***Open Space and Environment Goals-***

- P-1: Preserve, enhance, and protect the environmental, scenic, and natural quality of the Town.
- P-2: The Town of Warrenton's parks, open space, and environment serve as key elements to the Town's public health.
- P-3: Infrastructure. All Town residents will have the opportunity to access its recreational assets and natural resources, including public spaces, and recreational amenities.

## Fiscal Impact

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Redirect associated funds towards additional infrastructure and WWTP improvement projects.

## Legal Impact

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N/A

## ATTACHMENTS

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1. VA Dept. of Historic Resources Survey
2. WRA Horse Show Observations Presentation
3. WRA Proposal for Grandstand Repair Engineering
4. WRA Proposal for Surveying Property
5. Draft Deed with Virginia Outdoor Foundation Stipulations
6. VOF Notice to Award Grant Letter
7. VOF Program Requirements